# RABELAIS RETURNS TO HIS OWN HOME TOWN

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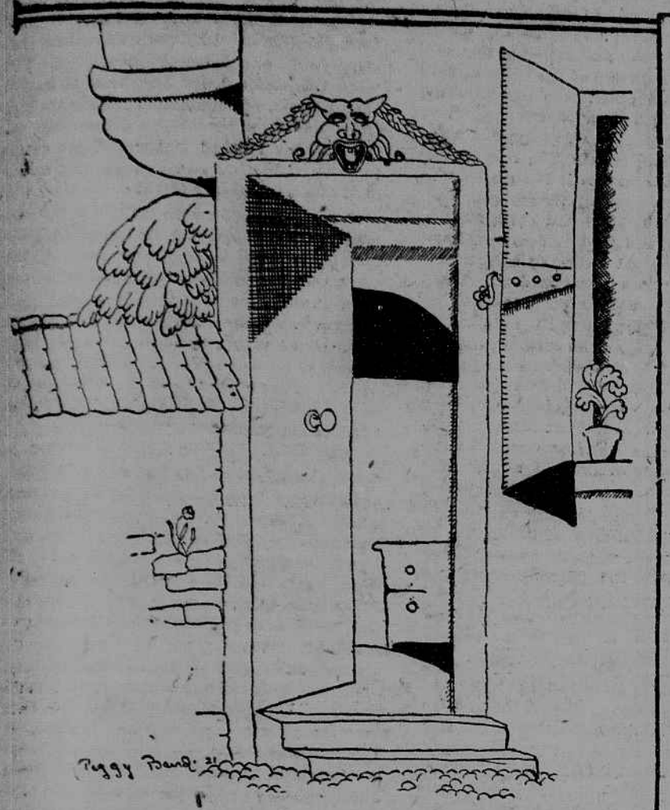


*The former inn, "At the Sign of the Stump," where Rabelais drank and feasted with his brother students*

SINCE the 6th of November Francis Rabelais has been formally recognized as the greatest citizen of his own university town. His statue was inaugurated as the climax of a week of fetes and ceremonies, during which the students of all France, and, indeed, of all the world, assembled to honor him. Rabelais received full recognition at Montpellier.

In America the situation is different. Most of us know that such a man existed, and that he wrote a book about a jovial giant named Gargantua, who was born from his mother's left ear. Also, perhaps, that he wrote about the still more jovial Pantagruel and his drunken companions, Panurge and Friar John. But that is all. The book is hard to find in the public libraries. It is issued in a fat red cloth edition that some of us got hold of when we were boys and read diligently till father found it. And then we ate our dinners standing up.

But in Montpellier the statue of Rabelais was unveiled with the aristocracy of the town surrounding it. Most of the other 90,000 citizens were a few rods away, pressing against the guarded gates of the Botanical Garden. The President of the French Republic officiated at the ceremony.

It required four hundred years, however, before Rabelais could receive this recognition in France. How many centuries would it take in Kansas? Considering especially that even in Montpellier, where he has always been loved, twelve generations of his enemies had to be buried before a noisy crowd could press through the streets in his honor, as if he were General Foch or Mary Pickford.

Four hundred years ago to-day Rabelais was a monk in the little abbey of Fontenay-le-Comte. His brother monks, unlike many of their age, were ignorant and bigoted. They suspected him of heresy, made a search of his cell, and—horror of horrors!—found it contained many books in that dangerous language—Greek. Rabelais was laid under heavy punishment and forced to flee.

For some years he wandered up and down the land of France, tasting the wines and the learning of every province. Medicine and the classics were his two studies. For some time he wavered between them, but he decided finally to become a doctor. He might have taken his degrees in Paris, but Paris was intolerant. Very likely he was a spectator when one of his acquaintances was burned at the stake for his opinions. That was in the spring of 1530. Shortly afterward he started the long journey on foot for the other famous medical school of the time, Montpellier.

That autumn the grape pickers outside the city met a ragged and dusty priest plodding along the road. His face, unlike his clothes, was severe and dignified, but a sly expression played about his upper lip. I can imagine them offering him a drink of the new wine, and I can well imagine that he took it. Afterward he crossed the little river and, weary and penniless, climbed the hill and so passed through one of the ten castellated gates of the town.

And now this town, where he arrived in rags, has risen to honor him. Feasts are given and processions are held in the name of Rabelais. Professors arrive from afar to hold public conferences on him. Plays are written about him, and there are galas at the theater. And, naturally, much good wine is consumed, which pleases the Chamber of Commerce and advances the one industry of Montpellier.

Picture this city into which he plodded (it has changed surprisingly little since his time). Narrow, cobbled streets climb tortuously up and down a hill; they begin and end unexpectedly. Along these streets proceeds the life of the town, the noisy and crowded, but leisurely, life of the south. antique coffee roasters smoke and rattle in the public highways. Windows are raised and buckets of slop drench into the gutters. The milkmaid makes her rounds on foot, disappearing occasionally into doorways that open into blackness. It is a city where anything could happen.

It is a city of sudden contrasts. The steep, dirty street you are following opens suddenly into a square of palms and flowers, with a pool and two immaculate swans (once there were three, but the students captured the third and roasted it at one of their feasts). Beyond this garden is another curlicue of streets and another square. It is in the largest and oldest of their public gardens that the bust of Rabelais was raised.

Picture the scene at the unveiling of the statue. Admission is only by invitation, and only to the elect. Directly in front of the bust stands none other than M. Alexandre Millerand, President of the French Republic. Behind him other official dignitaries are arranged: the Minister of Public Instruction, the rector of the university, the vice-president of the National Union of French Students. Behind them in a mass still other functionaries: the prefect of the department and his council, the Socialist Mayor and his council, the university professors, the flower of society of all Languedoc.

A hedge of students from every French university is formed to one side. On the other side there is a hedge of the foreign students who have come to honor Rabelais—forty Poles, ten Czecho-Slovaks, thirty Serbians, thirty Italians, fifty Chinese and even a handful from Puritan America.

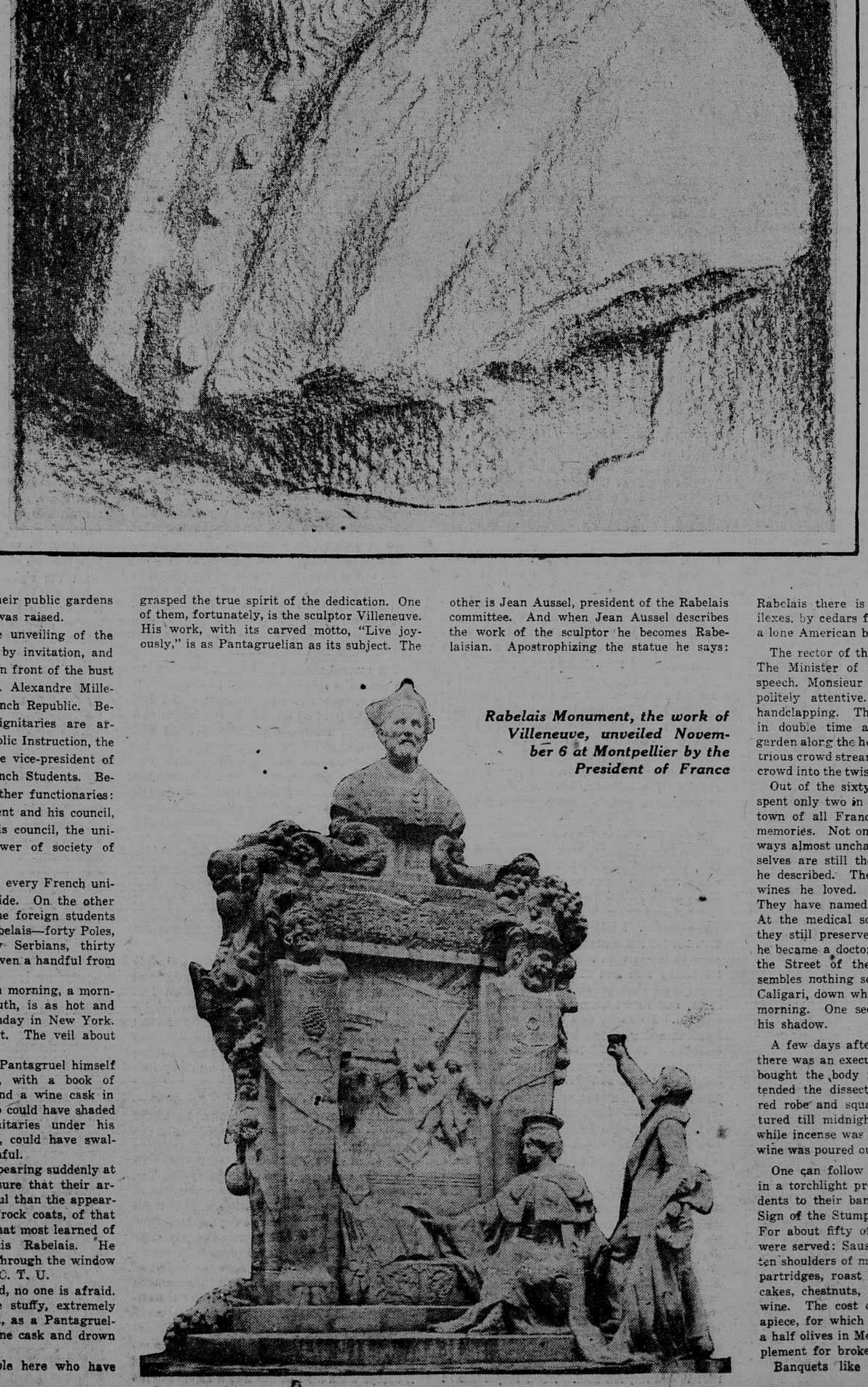
It is 10:30 of the autumn morning, a morning which, here in the south, is as hot and cloudless as a summer noonday in New York. The military band is silent. The veil about the statue falls.

And suddenly it is as if Pantagruel himself had stepped among them, with a book of Greek in one huge hand and a wine cask in the other. Pantagruel, who could have shaded this whole army of dignitaries under his tongue and who, if angry, could have swallowed them all in one mouthful.

I have heard of fauns appearing suddenly at garden parties, but I am sure that their arrival was no more wonderful than the appearance, before this army in frock coats, of that most notable of drinkers, that most learned of vagabonds, Messer Francis Rabelais. He might be Bacchus, leaping through the window into a congress of the W. C. T. U.

And yet no one is shocked, no one is afraid. The atmosphere is a little stuffy, extremely formal. Surely Pantagruel, as a Pantagruelian jester, will open his wine cask and drown the whole assembly.

But there are two people here who have grasped the true spirit of the dedication. One of them, fortunately, is the sculptor Villeneuve. His work, with its carved motto, "Live joyously," is as Pantagruelian as its subject. The other is Jean Aussel, president of the Rabelais committee. And when Jean Aussel describes the work of the sculptor he becomes Rabelaisian. Apostrophizing the statue he says:



*Rabelais Monument, the work of Villeneuve, unveiled November 6 at Montpellier by the President of France*

*The Street of the Needlemakers. It resembles nothing so much as a scene from "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari"*

"A delicate chisel has drawn from the hard stone of our soil this bust in which you live again for our eyes, with your air of intellectual distinction, with your fine maliciousness, with your playful gravity. You would, I am sure, have accepted this tribute gladly. Pantagruel, Gargantua, Panurge, Friar John have taken body also to serve as joyous caryatids at your triumph. Grapes and garlands of fruits unroll in your honor. At your feet the Faculty of Medicine, which remembers pages over the register in which you inscribed your name. Look! Humble admirer of your genius, a young student, your brother of to-day, reaches out to you the symbolic cup. Drink from it, master, with long draughts; drain from it, O very illustrious drinker! the sweet drunkenness of glory, the pure wine of immortality."

As for the other speeches, they lacked this fervor. Around us the garden was in its full November glory, with flowers still blooming and the leaves still green. Rabelais there is sheltered by deodars and ilexes, by cedars from Palestine, and even by a lone American black walnut treee.

The rector of the university made a speech. The Minister of Public Instruction made a speech. Monsieur Alexandre Millerand looked politely attentive. There was frock-coated handclapping. The band struck up a march in double time and the President left the garden along the hedge of students. The illustrious crowd streamed after him, like any other crowd into the twisted streets of Montpellier.

Out of the sixty years of his life, Rabelais spent only two in this place, and yet it is the town of all France which best preserves his memories. Not only are the houses and highways almost unchanged, but the citizens themselves are still the gay and sunny folk that he described. They still drink deeply of the wines he loved. And they remember him. They have named a boulevard in his honor. At the medical school, under lock and key, they still preserve the robe he wore the day he became a doctor. One can still wind along the Street of the Needlemakers, which resembles nothing so much as a set out of Dr. Caligari, down which he went to classes every morning. One seems to be almost living in his shadow.

A few days after his arrival in Montpellier there was an execution, and the medical school bought the body for 10 cents. Rabelais attended the dissection. The professor, in his red robe and square bonnet, carved and lectured till midnight by the smoking candles, while incense was burned to kill the odor and wine was poured out.

One can follow Rabelais, a few days later, in a torchlight procession with the other students to their banquet in the old inn At the Sign of the Stump. The building still stands. For about fifty of them the following meats were served: Sausages, chickens, five legs and ten shoulders of mutton, suckling pigs, rabbits, partridges, roast capon. For dessert cheese, cakes, chestnuts, fruits and several kinds of wine. The cost of the whole was 2½ cents apiece, for which one could now buy two and a half olives in Montpellier. There was a supplement for broken glasses.

Banquets like this one are described a dozen times in the Gargantua and the Pantagruel. They show how studiously Rabelais utilized his life at Montpellier. It was in this city, also, that he and his joyous companions played "the right moral farce of the man who married a dumb wife . . . I never laughed so much," said Rabelais.

And now that he has been fully accepted in academic circles, they are trying to canonize him. He really wasn't, they say, such an immoderate drinker. They explain away his pranks, and where they can't explain them they deny them. They claim that his love of the flesh was symbolic. Rabelais should be known, according to them, as a scholar, a conscientious priest and as the finest physician of his time. Pretty soon we shall hear of a new archangel, St. Francis of Montpellier.

But Rabelais himself would be the last to desire this celestial whitewashing. Better than the formal exercises attended by the President of the French Republic, he would like the gay, informal processions through the streets in his honor. There was the Monome, that peculiar snake dance of French students. Rabelais in his time must have taken part in one. There were torchlight parades (remember that under the influence of the hot skies and heady wines of Montpellier these functions are not so dispirited as they might be elsewhere). The afternoon of the inauguration there was a festival in the manner of Languedoc and in the spirit of Rabelais, with much good cheer, both mental and bodily, wet and dry. There was a gala at the municipal theater afterward.

But the function that charmed me most was the one which was least premeditated. After the theater a group of students met together in the square before the prefecture. It was there that Rabelais lived during his first year in Montpellier, eking out his resources by tutoring. Like his own Panurge, he was suffering that year from the disease of an empty pocket. As he says of Panurge, he had found sixty-three manners of filling it, all equally vain, "of which the most honorable and the most common was by fashion of larceny, committed furtively." On the site of his old lodging, then, the procession gathered.

It was led by Gargantua and Pantagruel, in medieval costume, mounted on high stilts. Following them were their faithful companions—Panurge, Epistemon, Carpalim, Friar John, carrying bottles and bunches of grapes. The rest of us followed with the torches.

In this fashion we progressed (not silently) between Caligarisets of the Street of the Needlemakers, following the path of Rabelais to his classes. On the site of his college we drank two toasts (or was it five?) and intoned a chorus.

The procession then became a pilgrimage, like that of Pantagruel's, in quest of the Oracle of Bacbuc, the Oracle of the Divine Bottle. The Oracle was situated, we decided, up the Street of the Well of the Palace, in the former inn At the Sign of the Stump. We wound onward, while windows were opened and oaths shouted at us in the purest Languedoc.

We found the Oracle. Instead of a bottle, it turned out to be a cask, and not an empty one at that.

Gargantua and Pantagruel tumbled down from their stilts and we pressed after them toward the cask. The Oracle was made to speak, and it spoke continually all that night. Its conversation was in seven languages and nine vintage, and ceased only when the sun climbed up the hill.

Afterward, through the cool morning, we made a last pilgrimage to the statue. The bones of Rabelais are lost in some obscure churchyard in Paris, but certainly his spirit could find no better rest than here. The city prides itself on its gayety, its learning and its good wine—the three things which he loved best in life. They have put his statue in the middle of one of the world's greatest and oldest botanical gardens. That also is a service he would have appreciated, for Rabelais was one of the greatest botanists of his time and loved flowers and trees. And he would have liked no homage better than that of the party of bedraggled students who came, after a sleepless night, to pour out a last bottle of wine before his statue.